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ABSTRACT

The perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding the following issues were assessed: the distinction between general and liberal education; the supporting philosophical or conceptual bases of general education; its societal goals and intellectual orientation; the place within general education of interdisciplinarity; and the role of general education in the graduate and undergraduate curricula. Study group members were proponents of general education and curricular reform. Of the over 330 respondents, 60 percent believed that there are important conceptual, substantive, and procedural differences between general and liberal education, while 35 percent considered the terms interchangeable. However, when asked to give their perceptions of their institutions' perspectives, the opposite was true; nearly 61 percent believed that liberal and general education were seen as interchangeable terms, while 36 percent thought that the two were considered to be distinct from one another. Nearly all respondents considered general education a component of the undergraduate curriculum, while nearly one half thought that liberal education comprised the entire program. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents felt that liberal education should be a component of graduate study. The pattern of responses suggests that there was a good deal of agreement among respondents concerning the concept and practice of general education. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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GENERAL EDUCATION: CONCEPT AND PRACTICE[1]

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Fundamental curricular reforms have seldom if ever been generated solely or even primarily from within. Even a cursory reading of the history of American higher education reveals the frustrations and failures experienced by nearly all initiators and most early innovators. Curricular reforms have been, as they continue to be, both a part of and a response to broader and more fundamental societal changes (Rudolph, 1977; Chickering, 1977; Hefferlin, 1969).

The emergence in the 1920s of general education was partly in response to excessive specialization at the undergraduate level and partly in response to the particular requirements of a society that had just come through a major war. Thus it was inclusive rather than exclusive in respect to its student body and therefore in its curriculum. It emphasized both substantive and procedural integration as a means of stimulating the development of habits of mind that recognized the essential interdisciplinarity of knowledge in the solution of problems, that provided a comprehensive rather than a fragmented and partial view of society and of life (Flexner, 1979; Interdisciplinarity, 1972). It is important not to lose sight of the strong and deliberate societal orientation that characterized the general education movement. It seemed clear to many of its proponents that if students were to understand their society and to contribute to its improvement, they would first need to confront that society both in and outside the classroom.

General education was from its inception a curricular movement, and thus it was concerned primarily with various dimensions of student growth rather than with the growth of knowledge directly. Its position vis-a-vis knowledge, general and specialized, differed significantly from other forms

of education, which were considered to be the appropriate bases for further specialization--i.e., for graduate and/or professional study. Hence many advocates of general education viewed liberal education as specialized, since its curricular and organizational structures were essentially identical to those of the university; that is, they were based solidly on the disciplines (Morse, 1964, p.11; McGrath, 1948, pp.8-9; Brinker, 1960, pp.133-138). Collegiate procedures and methods of instruction, moreover, were indistinguishable from those of the university, hardly surprising in light of the fact that many undergraduate faculty, especially those who taught in the more prestigious institutions, were university products and hence socialized to university norms.

Much has happened in the years following the emergence of the general education movement, which represented a major conceptual departure that was expected to lead to fundamental alterations in curricular and organizational structures and practices. Yet, it did not take long before the distinction between general and liberal education became in many respects unclear, even though the former was initially advanced as a reaction to the latter. It has even become difficult to determine whether a particular charge or criticism refers to general or to liberal education, since the two are sometimes used interchangeably.

For the student of higher education curricula these developments raise a number of questions regarding the current status of general education, and specifically of such conceptual and practical issues as the following: the distinction between general and liberal education; the supporting philosophical or conceptual bases of general education; its societal goals and intellectual orientation; the place within it of interdisciplinarity; the role of general education in the graduate as well as in the undergraduate curricula.

The primary focus of this paper is on the perceptions of faculty and administrators within five selected groups, roughly equal in size, concerning these issues. In several instances the questions sought both the respondents' personal views and their perceptions of their institutions' perspectives.

Some 500 questionnaires were sent to the members of the five groups, located in more than 235 two- and four-year colleges and universities throughout the country. Over 330 (66 percent) were returned. The groups consisted of faculty and administrators whose serious concern about general education and curricular reform had been manifested in various ways. Some were currently engaged in formal study and/or action directed toward the establishment or revision of general education programs (as, for example, their participation in the GEM project); others were heads of professional programs in higher education; and still others identified as their major professional concerns and activities the study and improvement of undergraduate curricula, especially general education.

The Population

The demographic section of the instrument revealed a population that was almost equally divided between teaching faculty (47 percent) and administrators (45 percent), with research and student services accounting for the remainder. Major fields of teaching and research interests were, in descending order, humanities (36 percent), education (28 percent), social and behavioral sciences (21 percent), and physical and biological sciences (8 percent). The remaining seven percent included mathematics, business, engineering, art and music.

Academic ranks were distributed in the following manner: professors 49 percent, associate professors 25 percent, and assistant professors

15 percent, with instructors and "others" comprising the rest. Of all ranks, 69 percent were tenured and only 17 percent were not; tenure was not applicable to 14 percent of the respondents mainly in research and administration. In light of the preceding data, the age distribution of the population, although high, seems reasonable--35 percent fell between 41-50 years, 34 percent were over 50, and 29 percent ranged from 31-40.

The total length of employment in higher educational institutions followed a similar pattern--41 percent of the respondents were employed between 8-15 years, 26 percent were employed 21 or more years, 18 percent were employed between 16-20 years, and 11 percent between 4-7 years. Again, the distribution of highest earned degrees comes as no surprise, as 76 percent of the respondents possessed the Ph.D., some 12 percent the masters, and 11 percent the Ed.D. Recall that only 28 percent were education majors. Eighty percent of the respondents were male and 20 percent were female.

Administrators comprised the following categories: deans (41 percent), department heads (19 percent), program directors (16 percent), and vice presidents (15 percent), with other designations comprising the rest.

General/Liberal Distinction

Given the primary concern of the study, it is significant that some 60 percent of the respondents personally believed that there are important conceptual, substantive, and procedural differences between general and liberal education, while 35 percent considered the terms interchangeable. However, when asked to give their perceptions of their institutions' perspectives, the opposite was true; nearly 61 percent believed that liberal and general education were seen as interchangeable terms, while 36 percent thought that the two were considered to be distinct from one another.

Further analysis revealed that those who personally distinguished

between general and liberal education were divided almost equally (49 percent and 50 percent) in respect to their perceptions of their institutions' perspectives. But among respondents who made no distinction between liberal and general education, only 19 percent felt that their institutions did differentiate between the two, while the vast majority (80 percent) thought that their institutions reflected their own views in making no distinction.

Respondents were asked next to select from the following two statements the one that best describes the societal goals of general education:

> The development of students who, through both on- and off-campus activities, understand the social, political, and economic institutions of society in order to contribute to their improvement.
>
> The education of students who, through the cultivation and application of intelligence, can provide the leadership necessary to assure a sound and stable society.

A third option--which asked for the respondent's own statement--was available and utilized by twelve individuals (4 percent).

Of the 60 percent who personally distinguished between liberal and general education, 63 percent chose the first statement, whereas 34 percent selected the second. Among the 35 percent who believed that the two terms are interchangeable, 63 percent selected the first statement and 31 percent the second. Thus, while the absolute number of those who considered the two terms interchangeable was much smaller than the number of those who distinguished between the two, proportionately the two groups were in essential agreement regarding the societal goals of general education.

The succeeding four statements have to do with specific curricular ideas and practices and, again, are analyzed according to those who distinguished between general and liberal education and those who did not.

Table 1
Curriculum Reform

	Differences (61%)		Interchangeable (35%)		Other (4%)		Total (100%)	
	N=188	%	N=109	%	N=12	%	N=309	%
General	94	50	28	26	7	58	129	42
Liberal	31	16	10	9	0	0	41	13
Neither	25	13	18	17	1	8	44	14
Both	38	20	53	49	4	4	95	31

Of the 61 percent who made the distinction in respect to this statement--

> The impetus for and emphasis on reform was essentially curricular, and a reaction to excessive specialization.

50 percent attributed it to general, and only 16 percent to liberal education. Thirty-five percent considered the terms interchangeable, of whom 26 percent associated the statement with general education and 9 percent with liberal education.

Note, too, that among those who differentiated between the two terms, 20 percent selected the response "Both," whereas 49 percent of those who considered the terms interchangeable chose that designation.

Table 2
Interdisciplinarity

	Differences (61%)		Interchangeable (36%)		Other (4%)		Total (100%)	
	N=186	%	N=109	%	N=11	%	N=306	%
General	100	54	30	28	7	64	137	45
Liberal	34	18	12	11	0	0	46	15
Neither	23	12	25	23	0	0	48	16
Both	29	16	42	39	4	36	75	24

The concept and practice of interdisciplinarity as an attempt to counteract the widening gap between compartmentalized universities and society

was the next concern. Some 54 percent of those who distinguished between liberal and general education (61 percent) believed that the interdisciplinary approach was more common in the latter, while 18 percent attributed it to the former. Of the 36 percent who used the terms interchangeably, the proportion was similar--28 percent general and 11 percent liberal. Furthermore, 39 percent of this group believed that interdisciplinarity is common to both curricular forms, while 23 percent indicated that it is common to neither form.

Of special interest is the response to this statement:

Moral and ethical developments naturally accompany intellectual growth.

Table 3
Moral and Ethical Development

	Differences (61%)		Interchangeable (35%)		Other (4%)		Total (100%)	
	N=191	%	N=108	%	N=14	%	N=313	%
General	25	13	7	6	0	0	32	10
Liberal	84	44	20	19	6	43	110	35
Neither	35	18	26	24	2	[illegible]	63	20
Both	47	25	55	51	6	43	108	35

The pattern of response differs markedly from all others. Thus only 13 percent of those who distinguished between liberal and general education believed that the statement reflected the general education position, while 44 percent thought that it was characteristic of liberal education. Among those who used the two terms interchangeably, only 6 percent and 19 percent respectively attributed the statement to general and liberal education. Note, too, that 25 percent of those who distinguished thought that the statement referred to both general and liberal, while 51 percent of those who did not distinguish selected "Both."

Next, respondents were asked to associate the following statement with general and/or liberal education:

> There is a viable relationship between work experience and academic studies in the undergraduate curriculum.

Table 4
Work/Academic Relationship

	Differences (61%)		Interchangeable (35%)		Other (5%)		Total (100%)	
	N=188	%	N=109	%	N=14	%	N=311	%
General	65	35	15	14	4	29	84	27
Liberal	36	19	9	8	2	14	47	15
Neither	43	23	36	33	1	7	80	26
Both	44	23	49	45	7	50	100	32

Thirty-five percent of those who made a distinction chose general, and 19 percent liberal education. Where the terms were used interchangeably, the corresponding figures were 14 percent and 8 percent, but 45 percent selected "Both" and, importantly, 33 percent selected "Neither."

Differences regarding the place of general and liberal education, either as components of or as the entire curriculum, are not of course of recent origin.

Table 5
Undergraduate Curricular Components

	General	Liberal
Component	90%	54%
Entire	10%	46%

For most respondents, both liberal and general education are curricular components. However, attention must be directed to the difference in emphasis attached to the two. While 90 percent categorized general education as a component, the place of liberal education was by no means so clear (Table 5).

Preferences in respect to graduate education were much the same.

Table 6
Graduate Curricular Components

	General	Liberal
Is:		
Yes	25%	46%
No	75%	54%
Should be:		
Yes	47%	71%
No	53%	29%

In the perception of a substantial 75 percent of the respondents general education is not a component of graduate education. Views concerning the place of liberal education in graduate study were divided and quite similar to those for undergraduate study.

When asked if either or both of the two curricular forms should be components of graduate education, the response was enlightening. Although the emphasis on general education nearly doubled (from 25 to 47 percent), an impressive 71 percent indicated their desire to see liberal education as a curricular component of graduate study.

Conceptual Basis of General Education

The difference in the perceptions of those who distinguish between general and liberal education and those who believe that the two terms are interchangeable and refer to the same thing is the primary focus of this study. Thus it is all the more important to identify the philosophical or conceptual bases of such differences. Toward this end, respondents were asked to select the one position among the following which most closely approximates the philosophical basis or conceptual framework of general education:

> Knowledge is valued as an end in itself, and the development of the human reason--the means by which knowledge is attained--is consequently a major emphasis. The program of study or curriculum consisted of the humanistic and scientific disciplines through which the cultural heritage is transmitted.
>
> Knowledge is viewed as one means of attaining a more abundant personal life, a stronger and freer society, and other ends considered desirable. The emphasis is on the affective as well as the cognitive growth of the student and hence on a variety of educational experiences designed to facilitate such growth.
>
> General education has and/or needs no distinctive philosophical basis; it comprises the "breadth" component of the curriculum and involves the study of a number of subjects common to all students in a particular college.
>
> If none of the preceding, please provide your own statement or position.

Of the 331 respondents to the question, 115 (35 percent) selected the first statement as the best expression of the philosophical basis of general education. But a substantial majority of the respondents (194 or 59 percent) identified the second statement as the best reflection of that conceptual framework.

However, when asked for their perceptions of their institutions' perspectives, nearly 35 percent (115) selected the third statement, although only 3 percent chose this statement as their personal view. But of those who personally preferred the second statement, almost half (49 percent or 93) attributed the same position to their respective institutions. Even among those who personally identified the first statement as the one that most closely approximates the conception of general education, 33 percent (38) selected the second statement for their institution and 27 percent (31) the first.

The preceding data represent important and, in most instances, substantial differences that require further comment.

Concluding Remarks

The effort to reach an experienced and interested population generally informed about the curriculum, especially at the undergraduate level, seemed to be successful. This was reflected not only in the composition of the administrative group but also in the age, rank, tenure, time of service, and curricular activities of the faculty.

Have these respondents differentiated between general and liberal education? Is there any agreement on the supporting philosophy or conceptual basis of general education?

A sizeable majority did make the distinction between the two forms of education, a distinction manifested with considerable consistency in such specific curricular notions and practices as those pertaining to the societal goals of general education, to curricular reform, interdisciplinarity, and work/study relations.

The case of moral and ethical developments seems at first glance to represent an important departure from the others; it does indeed differ from the pattern of emphases on general education. But so it should. More than three times as many respondents ascribed the notion--"moral and ethical developments naturally accompany intellectual growth"--to liberal education than to general education. The position has a long tradition in the history of liberal education.

Note, too, the differences between personal views and perceptions of institutional perspectives. Those who personally believed in the conceptual and practical differences between general and liberal education but who thought that their institutions considered the two interchangeable, provided the most striking example of this, especially since the numbers and percentages were literally reversed.

It comes as no surprise to discover that nearly all respondents considered general education a component of the undergraduate curriculum, while nearly one half thought that liberal education comprised the entire undergraduate program. For clarification one need only refer to the history of the emergence and subsequent development of the liberal arts college and liberal education.[2]

In the view of nearly three-quarters of the respondents liberal education should be a component of graduate study. Since the two are often similar in important respects, and since the former has historically been perceived as the most appropriate preparation for graduate study, the response is not difficult to understand. Yet, it may be well not to lose sight of the fact that nearly half of the respondents believed that general education should be a component of graduate education.

Although rank seemed to make little difference in respect to faculty perceptions, on three items (interdisciplinarity, moral/ethical development, and work/academic study) instructors were somewhat more divided than were the other ranks. Their comparatively short involvement in higher education and the nature of that involvement--especially during the decade of the 1970s when curricular concerns were often subordinated to more pressing financial issues--may account for some of the difference.

Differences between faculty and administrators were also slight. But recall that administrators as well as faculty were selected, as a group, on the basis of their interest and involvement in curricular reform. Futhermore, the issues in this investigation are primarily educational and consequently call for educational perspectives and priorities.

Finally, the statement of the conceptual basis of general education that was selected by a considerable majority of the respondents was in

fact intended to include the major elements of that form of education. The pattern of responses to succeeding statements suggest that there was a good deal of agreement among respondents concerning the concept and practice of general education. Although the introductory remarks pointed to the lack of conceptual clarity in current references to general and liberal education alike, the reader will recall that the population was deliberately selected for what was assumed to be its familiarity with the issue. Even with this in mind, the extent of agreement is greater than had been anticipated.

The importance of the context, especially in the case of curricular departures, should be underscored in these concluding remarks. It is the combination and interaction of all the elements in a particular context that provides the essential climate of general education.

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Footnotes

[1]The assistance of Professor David Passmore of The Pennsylvania State University is gratefully acknowledged.

[2]In a forthcoming monograph, of which this paper is a part, both historical and conceptual developments will be treated in some detail. See also the first few pages of this paper.